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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 002463

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [HR](#)

SUBJECT: SDSS LEADERS RALLY THE PEOPLE

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Classified By: PolOff Mitch Benedict for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

Summary

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1. (SBU) Under Croatia's peculiar election law, Serbs are pulled in two different directions in the run up to voting. They can vote for candidates on the minority lists or for candidates on the national lists but not for both. At a rally November 20, candidates of the moderate Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) encouraged voters to vote for the ethnic lists. Some say this makes no sense: the Serbs are guaranteed three seats in the next parliament no matter how few votes they get, so they should vote for the national parties most sensitive to their issues to ensure maximum influence. Not so, says the SDSS. Vote for them on the ethnic lists so SDSS members of parliament have the credibility of being backed by a large constituency. They will then be better positioned to do the bidding of Croatia's Serbian community, and maybe even play the role of a kingmaker in an otherwise evenly divided legislature, with whatever coalition eventually emerges after elections. End summary.

Last Day of Campaigning

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2. (U) With one full day of campaigning remaining in the run up to parliamentary elections on November 23, we attended a Zagreb rally of the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS). Held in a small concert hall in the center of the city, better known for rock concerts, the rally drew a mostly middle-aged and elderly crowd of approximately 250. A traditional Serbian band opened the rally, which was attended by current SDSS office holders from across the country, as well as the party's top three candidates: Vojislav Stanomirovic, President of the SDSS, Milorad Pupovac, Vice President, and Ratko Gajica.

3. (C) All three candidates repeated a now familiar theme of the SDSS campaign -- ethnic Serbs should vote for candidates on the ethnic Serb minority list. To urge all Serbs to vote on the minority list, when they are guaranteed three seats regardless of the number of voters, would appear illogical on the surface, since by doing so the Serbian leadership is putting at risk the reelection of a center-left coalition, their natural allies. At least three factors explain the logic. First, although there are three seats guaranteed for Serbs, this election presents a real competition between Serbs. Some observers predict the SDSS will win two seats and Milan Djukic, a more extreme populist -- based on name recognition alone -- will win one. However, the SDSS dreams of winning all three seats, as well as one or two diaspora seats, which would make them a respectable small party in Parliament and a force to reckon with. Though highly unlikely, an SDSS electoral sweep would require a significant increase in Serbs voting on the ethnic list.

4. (C) Second, along with so many other segments of the SDP's electoral base, ethnic Serbs are angry and disillusioned by what they view as the ruling coalition's abject failure to resolve their issues. They want a government of the left, but not a continuation of the current coalition, according to Pupovac. He declared that the last three and a half years have been wasted, and Croatian Serbs need a courageous and decisive government that takes their votes more into account than the voters of the HDZ. Pupovac said that Prime Minister Racan's much delayed call for Croatian Serbs to return was as convincing as when Tudjman told them not to leave.

5. (SBU) Gajica told the small crowd that he was approached in Knin -- the center of the war-affected area near the Bosnian border, with a population now consisting entirely of either returned Serbs or settled Bosnian Croatians -- by a representative of the ruling coalition, who said "since it only takes one vote each to get all three of your (Serb) members elected, give your votes to us." Gajica's response, intended to roil his audience, was that "they had our votes on a platter" before, but failed to address in any meaningful way issues of direct concern to the Serbian community. Stressing the theme that Serbs will not be taken for granted

any more prompted loud applause.

16. (C) Finally, to affect the work of the Parliament, and to be a legitimate partner of the ruling coalition, Serbs elected to fill the minority seats need to be able to say they speak for the Serbian community. We attended SDSS rallies both in Knin and in Zagreb earlier, and the message

was identical -- if only 10,000 Serbs vote on the minority list, and 100,000 Serbs vote for the ruling coalition, then the Government will be able to claim rightly that they have the mandate to speak for the Serbs. Gajica called such thinking "dangerous," and urged Serbs to use their numbers to build an organization that is both strong and lasting. Gajica and Stanomirovic both have stated at rallies that they hope such ethnic politics will not be relevant in 20 years, but lament that it is a realistic necessity now in order for Serbs to get their issues addressed. Pupovac privately has told us he would feel more comfortable within the folds of a "civic" social democratic party, but democracy in Croatia is not yet at the stage where there are issue-based political parties able to address minority issues adequately.

Not mincing Words

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17. (U) Looking tired and somewhat edgy, Pupovac ventured into territory normally off limits to politicians. It was "offensive and humiliating" for Serbs to be asked if they are "full Croatsians" and loyal to Croatia. He told the audience he personally hoped for a Croatia unencumbered, without disbelief, bad feelings, and mistrust. Sounding much more like a psychologist than the professor of rhetoric that he is, Pupovac expressed hope for a Croatia that could have a "relaxed relationship with itself." He spoke of a country where all are treated equal, and each is valued.

18. (U) A large part of Croatia was silenced, he continued, and the ruling coalition has not done its job to remove this suppression. Speaking of all Croatsians, he said people need self-confidence, and should believe more in themselves, rather than seek such confirmation elsewhere. Addressing Serbs directly, he said, "we certainly need to face certain truths, to ask why we are guilty too, either for omissions or for what others were doing on our behalf." However, he spread the blame when he intoned that Serbs should be able to accept not just their guilt but also those things for which they are not guilty -- and he then listed Croatian cities in which war crimes were committed against Serbian civilians.

Comment

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19. (C) From talking to ethnic Serbs, particularly their political leadership, and attending some of their rallies, it is clear that the Racan-led coalition has left many disenchanted. They see less need to vote for what would be their logical coalition partners on the center-left -- even if it means nationalist parties benefit on election day. Indeed, some Croatian Serb leaders may hope that the group of eight minority seats in the next parliament becomes a potential king maker in an otherwise evenly divided legislature -- giving the minorities more clout to extract concessions, from either a Racan-led or a Sanader-led government. A second reason why SDSS wants Croatian Serbs to vote for ethnic lists is more crass: the party cannot stand Milan Djukic, leader of the rival Serbian National Party (SNS). The lower the turnout in the ethnic voting, the better Djukic will do. In Croatia, as in the rest of the region, politics is personal.

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